

County invites cities to post public documents on the Web

California lawmakers crafted "The Purity of Elections Act," the state's first campaign finance law, in 1893 to fight bribery, coercion, fraud and secret election financing that was rampant at the time.

The law, which has been completely revamped and strengthened in the past 100 years, required politicians, candidates and their campaign committees to file regular finance disclosure reports with the Secretary of State.

As this historic legislation developed, lawmakers undoubtedly never thought people would one day scrutinize campaign disclosure forms and other public records in the privacy of their own home with the click of a button, but that kind of convenient public records access is just around the corner in San Bernardino County.

In February, the Board of Supervisors approved plans to begin posting a number of public documents on the Internet. In addition to campaign finance disclosure documents, also known as 460 forms, we plan to display statement of economic interest forms as well. The documents, known as 700 forms, disclose politicians and select public employees' investments in real estate, businesses, and stocks.

These forms are essential public documents that spell out where politicians get their campaign money and where public officials and employees' conflicts of interest may lie. Yet, as it stands, people can only view or get copies of the records during business hours from the Registrar of Voters or County/City Clerk's offices.

Once these documents are on the Internet, anyone with a computer and a Web connection will be able to anonymously review or even print them 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Even people without home computers will have access because most libraries and community centers have computers with Internet connections.

Additionally, we plan to place computers in the Registrar and Clerk's offices so people who come to the offices seeking the documents can quickly obtain them on the Website.

This is the kind of information access the public not only demands, but deserves.

Therefore, we are inviting civic leaders in San Bernardino County's 23 incorporated cities to join us as we launch this effort to make public records more public. Our new Website, once completed, we hope will accommodate copies of disclosure documents from all of our cities.

Imagine it. From Needles to Chino, this site could be a one-stop shop for public records in San Bernardino County. Residents will no longer have to venture to the Registrar of Voters or County/City Clerk's offices to pick up disclosure documents. They won't have to ask for a specific politician or employee's disclosure forms. They will simply surf the web to access a smorgasbord of public records. Then all they have to do is pick the documents they want to see and, with the click of a mouse, view them.

Residents of San Bernardino County deserve this level of accountability from their elected officials. Federal, State, County and City officials should be working to make these public documents easier to access. This last Wednesday representatives from seven cities joined us in advocating Internet access to these public documents. We are asking each city council to pass a resolution supporting this level of accountability, and an ordinance requiring these public forms filed in the city to be posted on the Internet.

To save money, cities can piggyback on the County's Website as well. We hope this step toward open government will encourage public review of the County and cities' political practices.

Open government fosters the confidence and trust of the people it represents. That's why lawmakers crafted "The Purity of Elections Act" so many years ago. We hope our efforts instill that confidence, and we sincerely hope all of the County's 23 cities will join us as we invite the world to take a look at these public records.